Is There Grace Outside The Church?

Saint John Church

When it comes to any discussion about religion, salvation is one of the more sensitive topics. It is difficult for people to accept that Jesus Christ made an exclusive claim to being God and the only Savior of the world. And it is all the more difficult for those who are Christian (but not Orthodox) to accept that these exclusive claims only apply to the Church Christ Himself established. Can there be salvation outside the Orthodox Church, or are only Orthodox Christians "saved"?

Estimated reading time: 4 minutes

What is Grace?

Before we discuss who can receive the gift of Grace, we first have to define what Grace is. **Grace** is the Uncreated Divine energy or power of the Holy Trinity, given to us *from* God the Father, *through* God the Son, *by* God the Holy Spirit. Without God's Grace there is no salvation, no spiritual life, no eternal life. Moreover, Grace bestows different gifts to those who partake of it, depending upon their needs and their openness to receiving Grace. We partake of God's Grace primarily through the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) and through the ascetical life (e.g. fasting and prayer).

Additionally, Grace is a gift from God, which includes existence, life, intelligence and salvation. We can do nothing to "earn" this. Rather, God freely bestows it out of His love for His people. According to the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas, the entire creation partakes of God's Divine energies, of which there are four types:

1. **Creative Energies** (everything in creation partakes of this)
2. **Animating Energies** (bestowed upon all living creatures)
3. **Reason-bestowing Energies** (reserved for humankind and Angels)
4. **Deifying Energies** (bestowed upon Angels and Saints)

Deifying/Sanctifying Grace is the one we refer to in this post.

Who receives God's deifying Grace?

According to the teachings of Orthodoxy, **only Orthodox Christians can receive the deifying Grace of God**. Why? We know that Christ is our Savior and our salvation. Therefore, we cannot access salvation without Christ and the Church He established as His Body. Since deifying Grace is what helps us obtain salvation and union with God, it belongs exclusively within Christ's Body. There is no sanctifying grace outside of Christ and His Body (the Church). The Lord planted His vineyard and placed a hedge around it (Mt. 21:33). There are those who are inside, and those who are outside (1 Cor. 5:12). Those outside do not receive God's deifying Grace.

Does that mean everyone outside the Church is damned?

Absolutely not! Much in the same way the Church does not believe unbaptized infants go to hell, she also does not believe that God will arbitrarily damn all those who never knew Him. God is sovereign. **He will have mercy on whom He has mercy and judgment on whom He has judgment (Romans 9:15).**

Saint Athanasius the Great, explains that God did not save man through a command or an act of will, because man would have simply become as Adam was before the Fall. The grace would have been external, not incorporated into his body. This distinction is the key to understanding how salvation is still possible outside the Church. Saint Diadochos, Bishop of Photiki (5th century), provides a more direct explanation:

> Before Holy Baptism, grace encourages the soul toward good from the outside, while Satan lurks in its depths, trying to block all the intellect's ways of approach to the Divine. But from the moment we are reborn through baptism, the demon is **outside**, grace **within**. Thus, whereas before Baptism error ruled the soul, after Baptism Truth rules it.
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> *"On Spiritual Knowledge," 76, in The Philokalia I, p. 279*

Let's unpack this. We know that during Baptism we are born again and walk in newness of life. Part of this rebirth is the implantation of Grace through the Mystery taking place, and this Grace continues to grow within us through partaking of the Eucharist and other Mysteries within the Church. Grace acts from

the inside **only** within the Body of Christ, the Orthodox Church.
The **unbaptized** are **unborn**, therefore grace does not act in them from within. However, they can respond to the impulses of the Holy Spirit, Who acts from the outside on all creation. We see beautiful examples of this in all the Old Testament Prophets and Saints. They had not been given the Spirit internally (as Christ had not yet been glorified [c.f. John 7:39]), but they responded to the external impulse of the Spirit upon them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we leave you with professor Vlassios Pheidas' summary of the Orthodox position on grace and salvation outside the Church: "Patristic tradition teaches that Christ, through His overall redeeming work, is the Source of Divine grace, and the Holy Spirit is the Bestower and the Operator of Divine grace is the faithful." He further states that, "the Orthodox tradition, by accepting the Holy Spirit as the Bestower of the Divine grace, which flows from the saving work of Christ, does not recognize the efficacy of the Divine grace outside the canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church."

Read More: Receiving The Holy Spirit: Chrismation In The Orthodox Church

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